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A Hymn On the Nativity.

BY JOHN MILTON.

I.

It was the winter wild
While the heaven-born child
All meanly wrapt in the rude manger lies;
Nature, in awe of him,
Had doffed her gaudy trim,
With her great Master so to sympathise:
It was no season then for her
To wanton with the sun, her lusty paramour.

II.

Only with speeches fair
She woos the gentle air,
To hide her guilty front with innocent snow,
And on her naked shame,
Pollute with sinful blame,
The saintly veil of maiden-white to throw;
Confounded, that Her Maker's eyes,
Should look so near upon her foul deformities.

III.

But he, her fears to cease,
Sent down the meek-eyed Peace;
She, crown'd with olive green, came softly sliding
Down through the turning sphere,
His ready harbinger.
With turtle wing the amorous clouds dividing;
And, waving wide her myrtle wand,
She strikes a universal peace through sea and land.

IV.

No war or battle's sound
Was heard the world around:
The idle spear and shield were high up hung;
The hooked chariot stood
Unstain'd with hostile blood;
The trumpet spake not to the armed throng;
And kings sat still with awful eye,
As if they surely knew their sov'reign lord was by.

V.

But peaceful was the night,
Wherein the Prince of Light
His reign of peace upon the earth began;
The winds, with wonder whist,
Smoothly the waters kiss'd,
Whispering new joys the mild ocean,
Who now hath quite forgot to rave,
While birds of calm sit brooding on the charmed wave.

VI.

The stars, with deep amaze,
Stand fix'd in steadfast gaze,
Bending one way their precious influence;
And will not take their flight,
For all the morning light,
Or Lucifer had often warn'd them thence;
But in their glimmering orbs did glow,
Until their Lord himself bespake, and bid them go.

VII.

And, though the shady gloom
Had given day her room,
The sun himself withheld his wonted speed,
And hid his head for shame,
As his inferior flame.
The new-enlighten'd world no more should need;
He saw a greater sun appear
Than his bright throne, or burning axletree, could bear.

VIII.

The shepherds on the lawn,
Or ere the point of dawn,
Sat simply chatting in a rustic row,
Full little thought they then
That the mighty Pan
Was kindly come to live with them below;
Perhaps their loves, or else their sheep,
Was all that did their silly thoughts so busy keep.

IX.

When such music sweet
Their hearts and ears did greet,
As never was by mortal fingers strook,
Divinely warbled voice,
Answering the stringed noise,
As all their souls in blissful rapture took;
The air, such pleasure loathe to lose,
With thousand echoes still prolongs each heavenly close.

X.

Nature, that heard such sound,
Beneath the hollow round
Of Cynthia's seat, the airy region thrilling,
Now was almost won,
To think her part was done,
And that her reign had here its last fulfilling;
She knew such harmony alone
Could hold all heaven and earth in happier union.

XI.

At last surrounds their sight
A globe of circular light,
That with long beams the shame-fac'd night array'd;
The helmed cherubim,
And sworded seraphim,
Are seen in glittering ranks; with wings display'd,
Harping in loud and solemn quire,
With unexpressive notes, to Heaven's new-born heir.

XII.

Such music, as 'tis said
Before was never made,
But when of old the sons of morning sung,
While the Creator great
His constellations set,
And the well-balanc'd world on hinges hung,
And cast the dark foundations deep,
And bid the weltering waves their oozy channel keep.

XIII.

Ring out, ye crystal spheres,
Once bless our human ears,
If ye have power to touch our senses so;
And let your silver chime
Move in melodious time;
And let the bass of Heaven's deep organ blow;
And with your ninefold harmony,
Make up full concert to the angelic symphony.

XIV.

For, if such holy song
Enwrap our fancy long,
Time will run back, and fetch the age of gold;
And speckled Vanity
Will sicken soon and die,
And leprous Sin will melt from earthly mould;
And Hell itself will pass away,
And leave her dolorous mansions to the peering day.

XV.

Yea, Truth and Justice then
Will down return to men,
Orb'd in a rainbow; and, like glories wearing,
Mercy will sit between,
Thron'd in celestial sheen,
With radiant feet the tissued clouds down steering;
And Heaven, as at some festival,
Will open wide the gates of her high palace hall.

XVI.

But wisest Fate says no,
This must not yet be so,
The babe yet lies in smiling infancy,
That on the bitter cross
Must redeem our loss,
So both himself and us to glorify;
Yet first, to those ychain'd in sleep,
The wakeful trump of doom must thunder through the deep.

XVII.

With such a horrid clang
As on Mount Sinai rang,
While the red fire and smould'ring clouds out brake;
The aged earth aghast,
With terror of that blast,
Shall from the surface to the centre shake;
When, at the world's last session,
The dreadful Judge in middle air shall spread his throne.

XVIII.

And then at last our bliss,
Full and perfect is,
But now begins; for, from this happy day,
The old dragon, underground,
In straiter limits bound,
Not half so far casts his usurped sway;
And wroth to see his kingdom fail,
Swinges the scaly horror of his folded tail.

XIX.

The oracles are dumb;
No voice or hideous hum
Runs through the arch'd roof in words deceiving.
Apollo from his shrine
Can no more divine
With hollow shriek the steep of Delphos leaving.
No nightly trance or breathed spell,
Inspires the pale-eyed priest from the prophetic cell.

XX.

The lonely mountains o'er,
And the resounding shore,
A voice of weeping heard and loud lament;
From haunted spring and dale,
Edg'd with poplar pale,
The parting Genius is with sighing sent;
With flower-inwoven tresses torn,
The nymphs in twilight shade of tangled thickets mourn.

XXI.

In consecrated earth,
And on the holy hearth,
The Lars and Lemurs mourn with mid-night plaint.
In urns and altars round,
A drear and dying sound
Affrights the Flamens at their service quaint;
And the chill marble seems to sweat,
While each peculiar power foregoes his wonted seat.

XXII.

Peor and Baalim
Forsake their temples dim
With that twice-battered god of Palestine;
And mooned Ashtoroth,
Heaven's queen and mother both,
Now sits not girt with tapers' holy shine;
The Libyac Hammon shrinks his horn;
In vain the Tyrian maids their Wounded Thammuz mourn.

XXIII.

And sullen Moloch, fled,
Hath left in shadows dread
His burning idol all of blackest hue;
In vain with cymbals' ring
They call the grisly king,
In dismal dance about the furnace blue:
The brutish gods of Nile as fast,
Isis, and Orus, and the dog Anubis, haste.

XXIV.

Nor is Osiris seen
In Memphian grove or green,
Trampling the unshowered grass with lowings loud;
Nor can he be at rest
Within his sacred chest,
Nought but profoundest hell can be his shroud;
In vain with timbrell'd anthems dark
The sable-stoled sorcerers bear his worshipp'd ark.

XXV.

He feels from Judah's land
The dreaded infant's hand,
The rays of Bethlehem blind his dusky eyne;
Nor all the gods beside
Longer dare abide,
Not Typhon huge ending in snaky twine:
Our babe, to show his Godhead true,
Can in his swaddling bands control the damned crew.

XXVI.

So, when the sun in bed,
Curtain'd with cloudy red,
Pillows his chin upon an orient wave,
The flocking shadows pale,
Troop to the infernal jail,
Each fetter'd ghost slips to his several grave;
And the yellow-skirted fays
Fly after the night-steeds, leaving their moon-loved maze.

XXVII.

But see, the Virgin blest
Hath laid her babe to rest;
Time is, our tedious song should here have ending;
Heaven's youngest-teemed star
Hath fix'd her polish'd car,
Her sleeping Lord with handmaid lamp attending;
And all about the courtly stable
Bright-harness'd angels sit in order serviceable.